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PERVASIVE BUT NOT THE POLITICAL ORDER: VIOLENCE, XENOPHOBIA AND INSECURITY IN TOWNSHIPS

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Background

The South African team set out to explore the xenophobic violence of the last ten years that characterises many poor, black, urban settlements in the major cities of South Africa. The project moved from the assumptions that the xenophobic violence was (i) driven by armed non-state actors, and thus constituted a form of (ii) non-state rule by such groups, even if this rule was (iii) limited both in space to particular poor, black urban township, and in time to the expression of violence for moments (at most days) when the authority of the state was surpassed. These ideas were explored through a case-study site of Imizamo Yethu in Hout Bay, Cape Town, a settlement of around 30 000 people with a significant number of foreign residents and a history of at least some xenophobic violence. Data was gathered through mixed methods including a survey of 306 households, over a dozen interviews with key community leaders, and a series of half a dozen Participatory Action Research workshops with both local and foreign respondents, community leaders and 'normal' residents.

Key Findings

Xenophobic incidents are mostly not driven by local leaders:

While there is some evidence that local leaders in Imizamo Yethu, in particular the local executive of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO), were involved in orchestrating the expulsion of many foreign residents from Imizamo Yethu in 2008, as part of the wider xenophobic wave that swept the county, there is more evidence to suggest that most xenophobic incidents in Imizamo Yethu stemmed from personal conflicts of various kinds that escalated to the group level. Also, in the last five years there have been only a handful of these conflicts. Notably, the 2008 expulsion did not include the Ovambo residents from Namibia and Angola who had successfully resisted a similar attempt at a pogrom in 1994, and have a reputation for being hardened fighters – with a number reportedly formerly of Savimbi's UNITA in Angola. Furthermore, the most widespread event, the 2008 expulsion, lasted just 24 hours before the ANC intervened to call residents back and no-one was significantly hurt at this time.

Local leaders are informal, but are not established as an alternative to the state. Indeed they are usually clients of the local state as mediated through parties and underwritten by race politics:

There is no formal mechanism for constituting community leadership in Imizamo Yethu, as it is one of three communities falling into ward 74 in the City of Cape Town. Wards are the smallest spatial unit of local government in South Africa, and the ward councillor is thus the formal representative 'closest to the people'. All community leaders of communities within the ward hold their positions informally.

However informality is not the same as independence. Local government is a source of significant resources for poor communities like Imizamo Yethu. Key here are government commitments to delivering services like roads, electricity, water and housing, and the part-time jobs that come with this work. A central dynamic in Imizamo Yethu, as in much of the rest of the country, is how the legitimacy of local leaders is directly impacted by how successful they are in extracting such delivery from the state, especially through the ward councillor. Thus access to the local state is critical for community leaders' informal claims to rule.

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Party identification and wider race politics are also critical for the standing of informal community leaders. In this regard, it was notable that claims to represent the community of Imizamo Yethu were monopolised by the local leaders of the South African National Civic Congress (SANCO). Established to champion the interests of poor communities to the post-apartheid state, and drawing on a longstanding anti-apartheid politics of organising at street and block level in townships, SANCO has chosen to enter into a formal alliance with the African National Congress (ANC), the liberation movement for oppressed black people turned dominant national party. Also important here is that SANCO continues to work in the established repertoire of political organising and mobilising of the ANC and its allies that stretches back to the anti-apartheid era.

Notably however, the mutually reinforcing logic of patronage and party identification is not available to SANCO in Imizamo Yethu as since 2009 the City of Cape Town has been run by the Democratic Alliance. As the official opposition to the ANC nationally, and alleged champion of white interests, the advent of the DA makes SANCO's relationship with the local state more challenging. Thus local SANCO leaders experience a real tension between trying to access the DA-run state (through claiming to play a non-partisan role), and retain a level of identification with the ANC, both in the eyes of fellow SANCO members and ANC allies, and in the wider Imizamo Yethu community. This tension has made the informal position of community leadership even more fraught in Imizamo Yethu, leading to open factional conflict within SANCO, and thus SANCO has weakened significantly over the last five years.

The use of violence is endemic and not constitutive of informal political power:

Although we set out to explore xenophobic violence as a form of informal rule, we soon discovered that feelings of insecurity are widespread amongst all groups in Imizamo Yethu and constitute the most significant challenge for residents of the township. In addition to xenophobia, the sources of insecurity include violent crime (especially at night and in unfamiliar parts of the townships), gender-based violence, livelihoods-related conflicts and food insecurity brought about by poverty and rats eating food.

During the research period in the site we witnessed some significant public violence between rival local taxis associations that saw one person shot, several assaulted and many cars damaged. Some respondents alleged that this conflict was fomented by rival factions of SANCO. There was also one incident where one SANCO faction led a protest to the house of the leader of the other faction, but no-one was harmed. Lastly, there was the account of how SANCO leaders instigated the expulsion of foreigners from Imizamo Yethu in 2008. Thus while there are examples of how community leaders used violence instrumentally, it was not that common, especially when the larger context of violence is considered. Indeed, it seems that violence is currently not constitutive of local rule in Imizamo Yethu. Thus the current factionalism within SANCO proceeds without overt use of force, but rather a legitimacy struggle carried out in terms of the twin demands of state recognition and popular support.

The perception amongst local leaders was that the police were failing in their role to provide security in Imizamo Yethu, although our survey suggested that the wider public had a more positive view with just over half feeling the police were doing a better job in recent times. More significantly, most felt that local leaders were failing to address the issues of insecurity altogether, and that the best guarantee of security were 'cats and dogs' – dogs because they warned you of danger and cats because they killed rats.

Citizenship:

Popular agency in Imizamo Yethu takes many forms, including participation of some residents in empowerment processes and rights-based mobilisation by NGOs such as health awareness programmes by James House (<http://www.jameshouse.org.za/index.php/our-programmes/isibindi>) or refugee rights work by People Against Suffering Oppression and Poverty (PASSOP) (<http://www.passop.co.za/>). However, in the case of SANCO, widely recognised as the primary representative of the Imizamo Yethu community, citizenship has increasingly taken the form of

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clientelism. Thus several respondents contrasted SANCO's high mobilisation and overtly political agenda of the 1990s with the low community turn out (unless resources are being distributed), and 'development' (service delivery) focus of SANCO today.

In addition to the shift from political mobilisation to development patronage, it is also clear that there are significant national, racial and perhaps even regional identities at play. Thus all respondents noted that SANCO meetings were regarded as for South Africans only and not for foreigners. This seems to be the result both of foreigner self-exclusion as well as the attitude of SANCO leadership. Furthermore, within South Africans, there are tensions along racial lines between Xhosa-speaking and so-called 'coloured' residents that surfaced in our workshops around the issue of SANCO hosting meetings only in Xhosa. Lastly, some respondents reported patterns of migration and settlement of people from particular districts of the Eastern Cape, suggesting a weaker but evident difference within the Xhosa-speaking community.

To this diversity of Imizamo Yethu must be added the fact that it was founded only in 1991, and that it has grown rapidly through waves of diverse immigrants, mostly in the last ten years. Thus today Imizamo Yethu suffers from both a lack of social cohesion and the lack of a common community identity. It is probably better seen as a collection of mostly national but also racialised communities living in an insecure context weakly governed by generally benign local leaders who are indifferent to foreign residents and episodically effective in securing modest resources from the local state.

Conclusion:

In general we would conclude that while local rule does matter in Imizamo Yethu, it is not constituted as a violent alternative to the state, even for short periods, but is better conceived of as modestly influential and non-violent patronage regime (framed in terms of a hierarchy of social identities) dependent on local state resources and party political standing.

Policy implications

In light of the above findings we make the following policy recommendations:

A programme specifically designed to address issues around xenophobia and racism in Imizamo Yethu, and between Imizamo Yethu and other communities in Hout Bay:

Based on a recognition of real issues of prejudice in the community amongst various groups, the City of Cape Town should initiate an anti-prejudice campaign in partnership with the local community, preferably via the same structure constituted to address issues of insecurity in Imizamo Yethu below. This campaign needs to extend beyond advice to foreign residents on their rights to engaging and educating all groups about the reasons for the presence of refugees, as well as refugee rights and joint actions between local and foreign residents to build social cohesion. A key part of this would be extending the programme to engagements between Imizamo Yethu and others in Hout Bay to build bridges within and across the communities that constitute the wider Bay area.

A partnership between the City of Cape Town and the community of Imizamo Yethu to develop a sustainable programme to address insecurity:

The key idea here is to develop a long-term programme to address insecurity in all its dimensions through a properly inclusive partnership between the residents of Imizamo Yethu and the City of Cape Town. The emphasis of the programme will be on insecurity rather than violence as insecurity is the most important issue for residents and can endure without overt violence. Further addressing insecurity implies addressing a wider range of social ills including food security. It also requires

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forms of community-building beyond the elimination of violence that can help build cohesion and shared identity among the diverse residents of Imizamo Yethu.

In recognition of the deep and long-standing causes of insecurity, the intention is to enhance and supplement the work of the police through developing a sustainable programme to endure down time. In addition to partnering with the police, this programme would supplement the activities of the Hout Bay Community Policing Forum rather than replace it.

The establishment of an inclusive, democratic and empowered community leadership to partner with the state on the programme

In the absence of an effective social movement that can lead the entire community of Imizamo Yethu on this issue, the state needs to establish a formal project executive structure that is 50% constituted by city officials, the police, political parties branches and SANCO in IY, and 50% by annually elected representatives from the community, including representatives specifically for the four key groups of Zimbabwean, Malawian, Ovamban and coloured residents.

This structure is specifically designed to be formal in city by-law, inclusive of all major groups and democratic in operation to ensure it can assert community views in an effective but responsible way. Relatedly, the decision-making processes of the project executive must be internally democratic, and transparent, with meetings open to any observation by any resident of Imizamo Yethu. Further, the process of programme development must be participatory, involving engagement with community groups and the public at large around key issues to be address, objectives, prioritising and the implementation of programmes.

Indeed a key objective of the project would be to build an active citizenship that affirms of the common humanity, dignity and rights of all residents before each other and the state. The idea is to build empowered and active citizens capable of both solving problems on their own and engaging the state constructively in democratic partnership.

Key references

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